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SUBJECT: PROVINCIAL CAMPAIGNING IN AFGHANISTAN

REF: A. KABUL 2120
[B](#). KABUL 2040
[C](#). KABUL 1560

[1](#). (SBU) SUMMARY: Since the June 16 start of the presidential campaign period, the major candidates have followed traditional ethnic and tribal lines in their campaigns through visits to traditional provincial strongholds, with shows of strength in opponents' territory. Political deals with tribal and ethnic leaders still comprise the main focus for several campaigns (ref A), however, the major candidates' campaign activities also include directly engaging the people, in particular the recent televised presidential debate (ref B) and some of the larger campaign rallies. Campaigning in the provinces shows the traditional versus the direct style of campaigning, seen in the small versus large rallies: smaller rallies represent the deals made with the traditional local powerbrokers, while the larger rallies are a newer phenomenon. Violence continues to limit all campaigns in the most dangerous provinces. End Summary.

[2](#). (SBU) Despite a campaign period limited to only two months by electoral law, active campaigning kicked off relatively slowly (ref C). First posters and billboards of candidates appeared around Kabul, and per PRT reports spread swiftly to major provinces such as Kandahar, Herat and Balkh, and reached smaller provincial capitals such as Gardez by the end of June, but that was all. While building name recognition held value, a position on the issues was not a priority for candidates. In late June, PRT officers in Bamyan and Gardez separately reported that many influential local leaders were refraining from public support of any candidate, instead waiting to see who took a clear lead before they would decide.

Home Base and Enemy Territory - Provincial Visits

[3](#). (SBU) In Kandahar, often perceived as a lens to view traditional Pushtun politics, the Karzai campaign launched quickly in conventional Afghan style. Two of Karzai's U.S. citizen nephews are managing the campaign in Kandahar and the first major political rally of the campaign season took place in Kandahar City on June 18 with approximately 1000 members of the Pushtu Barakzai tribe holding a rally in Kandahar city to show support for Karzai. Karzai's campaign denied organizing the rally; however, the Barakzai tribe's close ties with Karzai's half-brother, Kandahar Provincial Council Chairman Ahmad Wali Karzai suggest it was probably less spontaneous than claimed.

[4](#). (SBU) In another early move, on June 24 Balkh Governor Atta Mohammad Noor announced his support for Abdullah at a provincial administrative meeting. He admitted that government officials cannot campaign for a particular candidate, but stated to the meeting that "as an individual, I vote for Abdullah." His support in the province has been extremely helpful to Abdullah's efforts.

15. (SBU) On July 1, Abdullah started a new campaign trend when his appearance at a rally in political-hub Nangarhar drew an estimated 20,000 supporters from Nangarhar, Kunar, Laghman and Nuristan to downtown Jalalabad; in 2004, Karzai took 95 percent of the vote in Nangarhar. The Nangarhar PRT officer reported participants that included ethnic-Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Pashtuns as well as a mix of tribal leaders, intellectuals, and mujahedeen. The rally drew media and public attention and added momentum to Abdullah's candidacy. However, the ethnic mix of attendees, some bused in from neighboring provinces, could suggest that Abdullah's campaign was attempting to create the appearance of strength in Pashtun majority Nangarhar for a candidate perceived as Tajik by the Pashtun population. Senior Abdullah Campaign Advisor Satar Murat told us Abdullah campaigned in Pashtun territory to prove he was not only a Tajik, but also a Pashtun.

16. (SBU) In contrast, in some areas with limited campaign activity - Farah and Uruzgan - PRT officers report that the lack of activity is perceived to reflect the lack of competition since Karzai is believed to have a strong lead there. In 2004, Karzai won Farah with over 90,000 votes (compared to the almost 26,000 received by runner-up Yunus Qanooni (Kabul, Tajik) and Uruzgan with over 46,000 votes (Qanooni received 2,500 for second place). In Kandahar, where security limits political activity, campaign activity remains extremely limited. In 2004, Karzai won Kandahar with over 281,000 votes; Qanooni came in second with 9,202. However, difficult odds do not always equate to lack of campaign activity - in 2004 Karzai took popular campaign stop Nangarhar province with over 422,000 votes compared to number two Qanooni's 6,856.

17. (SBU) In Khost, where Karzai won over 207,000 votes in 2004 (Qanooni received 2,173 for second place) he appears confident that Governor Qalandarzai can deliver a large Pashtun voter turnout that will support his re-election. Qalandarzai has been open with PRT officers about his desire for a position in the cabinet of a second Karzai administration. In Ghazni, another low activity campaign area, Governor Osmamani told SRAP Holbrooke that he believed 90% of the people would vote for Karzai. In 2004, Karzai won over 238,000 votes in Ghazni with Qanooni taking 18,999 for second place.

Traditional Gatherings and Big Rallies

18. (SBU) Smaller and more traditional campaign events - often formed by tribal leaders - are a hallmark of the campaign. On July 6, two rallies - one by members of the Ahmedzai tribe, one organized by the PC Chairman - announced support for Karzai. On July 16, Second Vice-President Khalili led a several thousand person pro-Karzai rally in Jalalabad, but significantly smaller than Abdullah's July 1 appearance, a potentially dangers shift for Karzai since Nangarhar represents the largest block of Pashtun voters in the country. Several small rallies showed Abdullah support in Balkh on July 19. In Uruzgan the same day 150 people peacefully marched through Tarin Kowt carrying Karzai election posters. In Zabul on July 21 over 100 local leaders met to declare support for Karzai's candidacy. In Kunar, 300 people - including parliamentarians and provincial council members - came together July 13 to demonstrate support for Karzai. On July 25, MP and presidential candidate Ramazan Bashardost held a rally in Khost with around 450 attendees, and his campaign claims activity in seventeen provinces. On July 15, around 200 people participated in a rally for female presidential candidate Ferozan Fana in Asadabad. Small rallies, particular those with the participation of local leaders, also indicate campaign infrastructure and organization. However, many participants will attend solely for the free lunch provided by the candidate. Some observers and even candidates have asserted that many Afghans are politically savvy and will take the payoff but vote for the politician of their choosing.

¶9. (SBU) On July 14 Abdullah told us he had visited Ghor, Uruzgan and Badakhshan after the Jalalabad rally and claimed that supporters had turned out in each location with 3,000-5,000 attending each rally. On July 17, Abdullah made a campaign stop in Herat where over 20,000 supporters cheered him on at a "rock-concert style" rally. He followed that with a stop in Orgun - Paktika's largest town - where he participated in a 3,000 person shura and a July 28 Panjshir rally of around 3,000. In a nation that has spent 30 years fractured by war and internal conflict and where political alliances are often secret, large displays of public support by multiple tribal and ethnic groups could offer a new appeal. Abdullah and his supporters draw parallels between his campaign and the opposition movement in Iran. His rally in Herat was most illustrative of this, with men and women assembled in blue banners and scarves, the color of the Abdullah campaign.

¶10. (U) Karzai has waited until the last weeks of the campaign period before making a large push to directly engage the public since, according to some observers, he believes that the final two weeks are the ones that will be remembered. His presence at the large rally in Dar-e-Kayan in Baghlan province on August 1 showed the start of this phase of his campaign. Karzai's August 5 Gardez rally brought 13,000 people, and a speech about issues in addition to the traditional rhetoric; Karzai's embarking on his first major campaign speech shows a shift in tactics for a candidate who declined to participate in the televised debate just a week before.

Violence Curbs Activity

¶11. (SBU) Campaign related violence has also been on the upsurge in recent weeks. Although it appears focused against the process instead of targeting a single candidate and ideological ideal, it serves as a reminder for both candidates and voters of the Taliban's role in the electoral process. On July 15, unidentified gunmen shot Abdullah's campaign manager in Kapisa. On July 22, minor candidate and lower house MP Mullah Salaam Raketi, a former Taliban commander survived an ambush in Baghlan. On July 26, Karzai's first vice-presidential candidate Marshall Fahim's motorcade was attacked by insurgents while in Kunduz. On July 27, a suicide bomber was caught by the Afghan National Police outside the Lashkar Gah office of minor presidential Shah Nawaz Tani. On July 28, an Abdullah campaign official was shot in Laghman in a reported Taliban ambush. On July 29, a Khost campaign office of Abdullah was blown up at night, causing no casualties. On the same day, a bomb went off in a Karzai campaign office in Herat.

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